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Containers Wall Off a Newark Housing Project

By ELIZABETH DWOSKIN

[NEWARK](#), Nov. 7 — Tasha Solomon opened the grimy plastic blinds of her first floor-apartment in the Millard E. Terrell Homes, a housing project hard by the Passaic River.

She need not have bothered.

Although the river is only 100 yards from her apartment, Ms. Solomon, a 25-year-old mother of two, cannot see it from her window. Her view is a wall of rusty shipping containers that rises more than four stories, taller than any of the 12 buildings in the rundown housing complex.

“Is there a river over there?” she asked one recent afternoon.

Like drugs and gangs and poverty, the containers have simply become another unavoidable fact of life here, residents say.

For decades the project, operated by the Newark Housing Authority, has been flanked by storage depots where thousands of corrugated, trailer-size containers — a byproduct of the brisk commerce at the port in Newark and Elizabeth — sit stacked one atop the other in the barren cityscape.

There used to be some daylight.

An expanse of concrete between Ms. Solomon’s building and the murky river once served as the complex’s recreation area. Older residents recall mother-daughter kickball tournaments, dance contests, and summer evenings spent watching the lights from downtown shimmer in the distance.

“This is where we used to let it all hang out,” said Valerie Hall, who moved to the project in the mid-1960s and is one of the few who remember life before the containers. “When you’d look at those lights, it was like you could go downtown, and all you had to do was stand here.”

But about 15 years ago the housing authority, a troubled agency that barely avoided a takeover by the federal government in 2005, leased the gritty three-acre recreation area to a private container storage company. What once was a baseball field is now an expanse littered with shards of glass. And a patch of open space that allowed residents to look out on the river now provides a view of ripped and rusted cargo containers.

Keith Kinard was appointed executive director of the housing authority 16 months ago after a federal investigation called the agency “absolutely dysfunctional” for much of its 70-year history.

Initially, a spokesman for Mr. Kinard said there was no record of a lease or rent payments to allow containers to be stored on the premises, but two weeks later he said the agency had discovered an agreement in perpetuity in 1993 with the container storage company, Palmer Industries.

The agreement allowed Palmer, which had stored containers on each side of the housing project, to let them spill over onto the baseball field for \$650 a month, linking its properties together with rows of containers. Now Mr. Kinard says he intends to have the containers removed, although other problems must be addressed first. “I want them off my property,” he insisted.

But residents are not ready to break out the barbecue grills just yet.

“The city won’t do anything about them,” said Claire Johnson, 80 years old, who said the containers had been there for as long as she could remember. “They don’t care. Besides, they get a lot of money to park them there.”

While the few dozen containers on agency property are only a tiny fraction of the more than 27,000 that tower over this hardscrabble section of Newark, they were enough to seal residents off from the river.

Today, waist-high weeds stab upward through the concrete, and the homeless who make this neighborhood their home string clotheslines between broken container doors.

One man, known by friends in the project as Florida, was found dead last month, the police said, locked inside a container in the depot alongside the homes. The death is still under investigation. High up in the stacks, a container overflowed with trash, evidence of someone’s precarious third-story dwelling.

Reaching the complex requires trekking through some of the most dense and polluted industrial corridors of urban America. Every several minutes, the roar of jets taking off from

nearby Newark Liberty International Airport drowns out any hope of conversation. The rancid smell of garbage — perhaps from the Newark incinerator a mile away — permeates the air at the slightest gust of wind.

Just down the road is a dioxin-tainted Superfund site, where about a million gallons of Agent Orange was produced during the Vietnam War.

But with a price tag of \$25 million to bring the deteriorated buildings — two of which have broken heating systems — along with their mildewed hallways and 1940s-era electrical system, up to safety and sanitation standards — \$8 million more than the housing agency's maintenance budget for the entire city — containers are not high on Mr. Kinard's list of priorities.

"I've got homeless people squatting inside the apartments themselves," he said. "If containers were my worst problem, this job would be a walk in the park."

Last month, Mr. Kinard said, he asked the agency's legal department to find a way to terminate the agreement with Columbia Container Services, which took over Palmer's storage depots in 2003. He said negotiations would begin in the coming weeks. Two directors of Columbia Container, John Armstrong and Bruce A. Fenimore, did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.

One tenant, a 20-year-old bank teller, who declined to give his name for fear of being associated with the project, said he gave up looking out his window years ago. "It's an asbestos river anyway," he said.

For Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#), the plight of Terrell Homes is yet another test in the effort to revitalize this long-struggling city. As Newark begins to explore ways to develop its waterfront for recreational and residential uses, officials have to figure out what to do with thousands of containers that land at Port Newark-Elizabeth — the third largest port in the United States — and line long swaths of the Passaic.

"The city can't come to us and ask for jobs with the port and then say it wants to take the land these businesses are located in and turn it into parks or condominiums," said Randy Brown, a spokesman for the New York Shipping Association, which represents Newark's three storage depots.

The port and the network of trucks, warehouses, and storage lots that service it account for about 300,000 jobs, Mr. Brown said, one of the largest sources of employment in New Jersey.

He said a vast majority of containers stayed in the region for only 12 days before being shipped out on barges. The abandoned ones sit in the depots until they are repurchased, increasingly for scrap metal, Mr. Brown said, although he acknowledged that the industry did not keep track of the number of derelict containers stacked along the river.

But officials say the city, which recently began work on a public park along the waterfront from Newark Penn Station to the edge of the storage depots — including the Terrell Homes — is determined to find out just how many there are. Joel Sonkin, counsel to the deputy mayor for economic development, said the city had enlisted researchers from Rutgers and the [New Jersey Institute of Technology](#) to investigate the question.

For now, residents of the Terrell Homes remain in their walled city. Older women chat away the afternoon, and teenage boys in bandannas cluster around the cars in the benchless complex, their voices smothered by the drone of planes. Children dare one another to scale the fence that separates them from the container-choked lot.

“It looks like some kind of scrap yard or recycling plant,” said Denise Suver, 46. “This is a place for people to live, not a garbage dump.”

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